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AUTHOR Franz, Jennifer D.
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ABSTRACT

A community-wide survey to examine needed changes in the Sacramento City Unified School District high school program was designed and implemented. Because of problems encountered in presenting a proposal, a major initial and ongoing objective was the education of administrators and board members in conducting a valid community survey. Underlying design premises were that many segments of the community have valid opinions on subjects related to schools, survey research provides a mechanism for basing decisions on total community views, school district personnel who determine changes in school programs should "own" the research upon which decisions are made, and administrators should fully understand the procedures and reasons for them. In a three-stage priority-setting process, high priority and low priority questions were drafted. The final draft was evaluated by the principals. Actual conduct of the telephone survey used a random-digit-dialed sample. Although administrators took strong exception to several community opinions, the issues were debated on their merits rather than through an attack on the research. Client "ownership" and methodological understanding of the survey was worthwhile. (CN)

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WHAT "SHOULD BE" IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM
A COOPERATIVE APPROACH USING SURVEY RESEARCH METHODS

OR

CONVINCING LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS OF THE VALUE OF SURVEY RESEARCH

Jennifer D. Franz

Paper Presented at the

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J.D. FRANZ RESEARCH
2740 Fulton Avenue, Suite 225
Sacramento, California 95821

Background

Sacramento City Unified School District is a metropolitan K-12 district serving approximately 40,000 students in California's state capitol. The district is predominantly urban in nature and has an enrollment which is 45.0% white (non-Hispanic), 22.6% Black, 16.8% Hispanic, 14.3 Asian or Pacific Islander and 1.3% other ethnic minority.

In recent years, the district's Board of Education has heard criticisms from a variety of constituencies about the inadequacy and/or insufficiency of its high school curriculum and graduation requirements. These ranged from the perhaps predictable calls for more emphasis on "basic" subjects to contentions that the physical education requirement should be increased. Concerns about the scope and sequence of the high school curriculum were further exacerbated by the need to set priorities, dictated by declining resources. Gradually, a consensus emerged that some type of change was in order.

Having determined that the high school curriculum merited attention, the district was faced with not one but two fundamental questions. One of these questions was fairly obvious: what sorts of changes ought to be made? The second - basically a research questions - was less obvious, but perhaps ultimately more important: what information sources should be utilized to determine the nature of the changes? As the messages the Board of Education had received on the former subject had been both numerous and frequently conflicting, the district chose to address the second question first.

In academic year 1981-82, the district's five high school principals were awarded a Danforth Foundation leadership development grant, one of five such grants awarded nationwide each year. As a condition of receiving this grant, the principals were required to develop and implement a project designed to improve local high school leadership and programs. Outside consulting assistance could be utilized in this undertaking, but

primary responsibility for project development was to remain with the principals. As their Danforth project, the Sacramento principals elected to address the subject of needed changes in the high school curriculum.

As the principals discussed their proposed project with various external consultants and consulting firms, they came to the consensus that their own expertise plus added readings and discussion on high school curriculum issues (guided by a local university professor) were an insufficient basis actually for recommending curriculum changes. Specifically, they noted the conflicting testimony from various constituencies before the Board of Education and concluded that they needed to obtain input which could be said to be representative of the schools' constituents as a whole rather than merely the voices of "pressure groups." Accordingly, they decided to commission a community-wide survey on the high schools and to contract with an outside firm to assist them with the survey's design and implementation. The firm ultimately selected was J.D. Franz Research (JDFR), a Sacramento-based educational and survey research organization.

The Problem

Educational administrators tend to have limited familiarity with professional survey research methods, particularly in the context of community-wide or general population opinion surveys. Most administrators have conducted surveys during the course of their professional or preprofessional lives, but these surveys have usually targeted other members of the professional community. As a result, an administrator's entire conception of survey methods may be confined to his or her doctoral research or to periodic surveys of faculty and staff.

The types of survey research with which most administrators are familiar are well suited to inexpensive and fairly simple mailed or hand-delivered inquiries of relatively small samples. Because the samples tend to

consist of other professionals with a vested interest in the survey subject, response rates tend to be high and a minimum amount of follow-up is required to obtain the desired results. Familiarity with these methods, approaches and outcomes leads to what might be termed a "working definition" of survey research among administrators which views the conduct of a survey as an inexpensive, simple and relatively efficient mechanism for obtaining information from a large proportion of the appropriate population.

For professional survey researchers proposing to conduct a valid and reliable opinion poll among a probability sample of district residents, the administrative mind-set vis-a-vis surveys presents a number of problems. First, public opinion polling on the scale desired by the Sacramento City Unified School District is not an inexpensive proposition. (The principals wanted a minimum of 1,000 completed responses because a thousand was a "politically viable number" insofar as the Board of Education was concerned. Recourse to sampling tables was not perceived as being adequate to convince the Board that far fewer responses would suffice for the district's purposes.) Second, the quality control which any reputable firm will exercise scarcely presents an image of simplicity. Third, the most cost-effective method of conducting a survey of this nature - telephone interviewing - rarely appears efficient to those accustomed to investing a few dollars in paper, envelopes and postage and watching the returns flow in.

These problems were compounded in this particular instance by what we suspect was a relatively unique situation: two members of the Board of Education simply did not believe in surveys. One of them steadfastly maintained that inviting residents to luncheons throughout the community would achieve the same objectives at reduced cost and with equally valid results; a six-page "dissertation" on the problems inherent in this approach proved unconvincing. Although this member conceded when the survey had been completed that the professional approach had been

warranted, the other dissident maintained to the end that he did not believe surveys were valid.

The immediate result of these problems and skepticisms was that when our firm initially presented what was later to become the winning proposal to conduct the survey, princpals and Board members alike were first horrified and then baffled. The fundamental question - "Why?" - rapidly yielded to concerns about credentials, years of experience, references, "have other districts actually *done* this?" and "have *you* actually done this for *other* school districts?" Despite our ability to answer all inquiries in the affirmative and to present the requisite credentials and references from local districts, considerable unease remained. The "Why?" had not been answered, and we concluded that until it was, the most professional and meticulous survey any firm could possibly conduct would not be accepted.

Objectives

As the principals wrote in a September 1981 progress report, the objective of the Danforth Foundation project was to "make recommendations for [the] Sacramento City Unified School District High School Program based on [the] analysis of a community survey," with the focus of these recommendations being on "what should be" in terms of the scope and sequence of the high school curriculum. The principals also specified that survey findings would be "tempered" by their own experience and expertise in secondary education.

JDFR's contractual and professional objective was to design a survey which would meet the principals' information needs to the maximum extent possible and then to implement that survey in such a manner as to be able to ensure the principals that the results were indeed representative of the community (within standard statistical limits). Because of the problems we encountered in presenting and explaining our proposal, however, we decided that a major initial and ongoing objective, above and beyond the

survey itself, would be the education of administrators and Board members as to the methods and procedures necessary to conduct a valid community survey.

Perspective

The design and implementation of this survey was based on four underlying premises:

1. Boards of Education typically hear from only the most active and vocal portions of their constituencies. Many segments of the community have valuable and valid opinions on subjects related to schools which are never or only weakly heard by a Board.

2. Major decisions which affect all segments of the community should not be made without taking the perceptions of all segments of the community into consideration. Survey research provides a mechanism for basing decisions on the views of the total community.

3. Utlimately, it is the responsible school district personnel who must determine and defend any changes which are made in school programs. It is therefore they who should "own" the research which develops the information upon which change decisions will be based. The role of survey research consultants, however experienced in education, should be limited to providing the technical expertise necessary to ensure that the research in fact produces the needed information and that it does so in a valid and reliable manner. In this way, survey research can become a truly cooperative effort between researchers and administrators.

4. Administrators cannot "own" the results of a survey unless they fully understand the methods being used, the reasons

these particular methods were selected, what procedures will be used and why, and what various quality control mechanisms can be expected to accomplish. Because general population surveys call for complex considerations of many interdependent variables (i.e., because "it depends" is an integral part of the survey researcher's vocabulary), discussion of the "why's" and "how's" should be ongoing and in-depth rather than being limited to a brief presentation of credentials and knowledge.

Methods

The instrument to be used for the survey was designed on the basis of questions proposed by the high school principals. At no time did we attempt to influence the principals concerning the actual content of the survey in order to ensure that it was from the begining the principals' project.

When it became apparent that the number of questions of interest to the principals exceeded the previously established scope of the survey, a three-stage priority-setting process was used to determine which queries would be included. First, facilitation was used to develop and prioritize nine general categories of inquiry. For the second stage, the principals' 100+ questions were sorted into the nine categories and divided into three ranked sets (low, medium and high priority) for the principals' consideration. Finally, JDFR prepared an actual draft instrument containing all of the high priority questions and those lower priority questions which appeared to be reasonably consistent with the thrust of the high priority inquiries.

During the discussion of this still overly-lengthy draft, the principals were taught how to evaluate it in terms of such issues as question wording, flow, the possibility of inducing bias by question placement, content vs. demographic questions and total length. The product of this

meeting was a final draft which was technically workable and in which the principals could have knowledgeable confidence.

The final draft instrument was pre-tested among a sample of residents selected at random from the telephone directory. In order to facilitate the principals' "ownership" of the instrument and understanding of the way in which it would be implemented, those principals who were interested were included as part of the pre-test team and involved in the ensuing discussion of pre-test results. This involvement served to convince participants that the instrument would "work," that the survey was not too long for residents to handle, that people would actually welcome being asked about the schools, and that telephone interviewing does in fact elicit the desired information.

The sample for the survey was random-digit-dialed and was developed by superimposing a map of the district boundaries on a map of local telephone prefix boundaries. Because the boundary lines of these maps were never congruent and only rarely totally contained (as would be the case in virtually any California community), the principals were asked to decide which areas to include. After JDFR reviewed the alternatives and their implications with the principals, they were able to decide with authority to include all but one of the prefixes which had been assigned to any district household, even though this meant that some non-district residents would be interviewed. (The single prefix which was eliminated covers a sizeable area of which only a small and largely industrialized fraction is included in the district).

Actual conduct of the survey took place by telephone from a central location at one of the district's high schools between January 7 and January 23, 1982. The fact that we interviewed from one of "their" schools rather than our business office also served to enhance the principals' "ownership" of the survey. In addition, the principals and other interested administrators were invited to visit the interviewing site after regularly scheduled progess report meetings at the school and/or whenever they were in the area.

All but one elected to visit at least once, and one came by several times.

When visitors arrived, they were introduced to the site supervisor, the research assistant and any interviewers who were not on the telephone. They were also given a "tour" of the workroom where surveys were being checked and logged in and invited to listen in on actual interviews or interview verifications. These visits gave principals a first-hand sense of the organization and personalities involved, the excitement the entire staff felt because the community was extraordinarily responsive, and the progress being made toward the 1,000-interview goal. Each visit increased the visitor's understanding of and confidence in the procedures being used.

After the results had been coded and analyzed, the findings were presented to the principals, then to the superintendent and finally at a special meeting of the Board of Education. In addition to preparing a summary report and supporting appendices, we developed an oral presentation which utilized color transparencies. These transparencies were used not only to highlight key findings as they might be in a more conventional presentation, but also to enhance a discussion of methods and an introduction by simple analogy to the concept and application of "statistical significance" which preceded the presentation of findings. The principals' "ownership" of and pride in the survey were particularly apparent during the Board meeting, as they introduced *their* consultant to discuss *their* survey and fielded virtually all of Board members' questions themselves.

Results

Predictably, most of the responses to the survey were well within the expectations of the principals. Thus, for example, it was not particularly surprising to find that virtually all respondents (98.5%) believed Englih should be required for graduation and that a majority (57.6%) thought the subject should be required for four years.

Several responses, however, were quite counter-intuitive insofar as the principals' perceptions of the community were concerned, and a few directly contradicted the messages special interest groups had conveyed to the Board. For example, the principals were surprised to find that almost two-thirds of respondents (63.8%) thought family life and sex education should be required for graduation. Similarly, the message the Board had received regarding physical education was contradicted by the sentiments of a majority of respondents, 13.1% of whom said the current requirement was appropriate and almost half of whom (49.4%) said the subject should be required for *more* years than at present. Findings such as these validated the original premise that what the Board of Education *hears* from the public is not always *representative* of that public.

Evidence with regard to our second premise is of necessity somewhat more subjective, for this premise is essentially a matter of opinion. It is worthy of note in this regard, however, that the results of this research were used as a basis for *action*. Immediately following the presentation and discussion of the findings, the Board of Education directed the principals to devote the summer of 1982 to developing recommendations for curricular change on the basis of the survey results. These recommendations were submitted to the superintendent in August and to the Board in the fall. By the end of 1982, all of the recommendations had been adopted for implementation in the 1983-84 school year, and those which reasonably could had been made effective immediately.

Finally, although the evidence is still subjective, we believe that our third and fourth premises are amply supported by the outcomes of this survey. The principals' ownership of their survey was evident in all of their communications with the superintendent, the Board and the press. The Board President commented publicly on the leadership the principals had developed and on the high caliber of work they had produced. To all of those who worked on the survey, there is no question that the Board's

acceptance of the survey as a mandate for curricular change and its subsequent adoption of the principals' recommendations resulted in large part from the principals' confidence that the results were valid reflections of the community and that they had obtained the information they needed to propose constructive changes.

Insofar as the principals themselves are concerned, all of the feedback JDFR received strongly suggests that the principals' ownership of and confidence in the survey derived from three factors:

- the knowledge that the questions which had been asked were the ones which *they* wanted and needed to ask
- the realization that the consulting firm paid strict attention to appropriate methods, procedures and quality control measures
- a sufficient *understanding* of the "why's" and "how's" of these methods, procedures and quality control mechanisms to communicate their necessity and effects to others

It is virtually a truism in educational research that if the client does not like or disagrees with the findings, the point of attack will be not the findings but the methods used to obtain them. In this instance, although both the principals and members of the Board took strong exception to several of the community's opinions, the issues were consistently debated on their merits rather than their methods. We view this willingness to debate the issues raised by research rather than attacking the research itself as the strongest evidence that the creation of client "ownership" of a survey along with ongoing attention to methodological understanding is well worth the additional effort it requires.